

# Website Spotlight



## Colonial Williamsburg's 18<sup>th</sup> C. Clothing Website

**Philip Gust\***

*A leader in American and British Colonial historical studies, Colonial Williamsburg's 18<sup>th</sup> C. Clothing website offers information and reference material on historical costumes of the period.*

The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation operates the world's largest living history museum in Williamsburg, Virginia—the restored 18th-century capital of Britain's largest, wealthiest, and most populous outpost of empire in the New World. The 301-acre Historic Area includes hundreds of restored, reconstructed, and historically furnished buildings.

Costuming has always played an important role in the historical research, preservation, and interpretation programs at Colonial Williamsburg. Understanding what people of the period, of all ranks and social position, wore provides historical context to all other aspects of life in those times. It also plays an important role in interpreting the history for the millions of people who visit Colonial Williamsburg from all over the world every year.

Colonial Williamsburg has developed an impressive collection of historic costume research and artifacts over the years. These include paintings and illustrations of the time, and an impressive number of historical costumes and accessories that they conserve and make available for study by historians and historical costumers. Now, a new online website makes a significant amount of these resources available to costumers.

Their [18<sup>th</sup> Century Clothing](#) website offers information and reference material about historical costuming for the time period. The website is organized into areas of interest, such as men's and women's clothing, children's clothing, and African-American clothing. Rotating online exhibits focus on special costuming related topics, illustrated by period pieces from theirs and other collections. Sections on clothing related trades, such as Milliner, Shoemaker, Tailor, Weaver and Wigmaker provide interesting details about each one.

Finally, a section on their Costume Design Center has a timeline of costumed interpretation at Williamsburg. The article, "Dressing for the Occasion" talks about the evolution of costuming at Williamsburg. A downloadable resource list is for those who want to reproduce historic costumes.

### Interest Areas

*The Woman's Clothing* section of the website includes resources that cover the anatomy of a gown, shoes and accessories, a glossary of terms, and an article on 18th-century maternity clothing.

The pages on the anatomy of a gown, and shoes and accessories, says that rolling over an area of the gown displays a description. This roll-over feature does not work in Internet Explorer, Firefox, Safari, or Chrome on my computer. It uses an HTML

ONLINE RESOURCES

People  
Places  
Life  
Revolution  
Trades  
**Clothing**  
Overview  
Introduction  
Women's Clothing  
Men's Clothing  
Children's Clothing  
African American clothing  
Milliner Shop  
Costume Design  
Gardens  
Tour the Town online  
Fifes and Drums  
Costume Design Center  
Garden Programs  
Conferences, Forums, and Workshops

### 18th-Century Clothing

New Online Exhibit  
Historic Threads:  
Three Centuries of  
Clothing

Explore antique clothing and accessories from 1600-1860 in this new online exhibit. Learn more

Looking at 18th-Century Clothing  
Clothing can reflect status and situation for men and women.

African-American Clothing in Colonial Williamsburg  
Images of African Americans across society.

Anatomy of a Gown  
See the gown's structure revealed.

Anatomy of a Suit  
Uncover the components of a colonial man's suit.

Dressing the Part: an interactive adventure  
Dress a colonial person from head to toe.

An Eighteenth-Century Paper Doll  
See how a girl gets ready for her day in the 1700s.

Around the Globe  
Material for clothing comes from all over the world.

Shoes & Accessories  
Finishing touches complete a lady's ensemble.

feature known as “image maps”, which many not be well-supported on recent versions of these browsers. I reported the problem to the site's webmaster.

The page on maternity wear is a well-written article by their curator of textiles and costumes. The glossary is also well-written and includes images and links to other parts of the website.

**The Men's Clothing** section includes resource on the anatomy of a suit, a men's clothing glossary, and an article on men's wigs. The anatomy of a suit page has the same roll-over problem mentioned earlier. The article on wigs is descriptive and does not cover actual wig construction. It includes a number of image thumbnails that link to larger image that show more detail. The article also links to an article on the Wigmaker's trade with additional photos. The glossary is well-written and includes



Exhibit main display for viewing learning guides and exploring.

images and links to other parts of the website.

**The Children's Clothing** section includes a well-written and illustrated article by their curator of textiles. There is also a Flash-based paper doll children's game, a detailed article on Child-Bed Linens by the supervisor of the James Geddy House who has done extensive research on the subject, and a well-written and illustrated glossary with small photos illustrating some of the terms with links to larger versions.

**The African American Clothing** section is a scrapbook of Colonial Williamsburg African American interpreters dressed in 18th-century attire. Each image links to a larger version.

### Exhibits

The website includes rotating exhibits related to costuming of the period. The current exhibit, “Historic Threads: Three Centuries of Clothing” explores antique clothing and accessories from 1600-1860.

The exhibit is divided into two parts. The first part is a comprehensive set of learning guides that cover all aspects of clothing for the periods of the exhibit, including formalwear and fashionable clothing, everyday clothing, and lifecycle clothing – worn by people at various periods

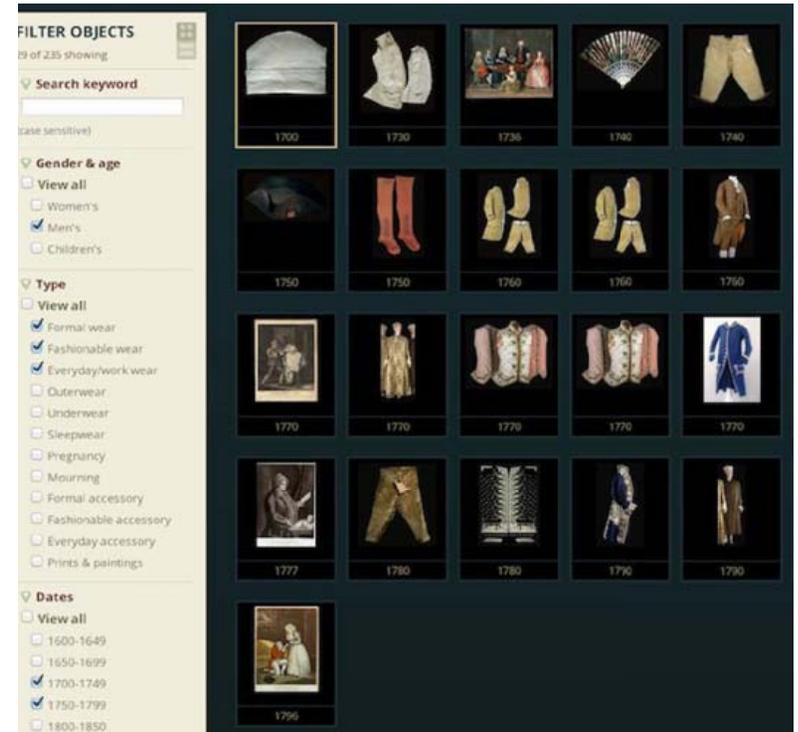


Exhibit finding aid for locating and selecting images of matching items.

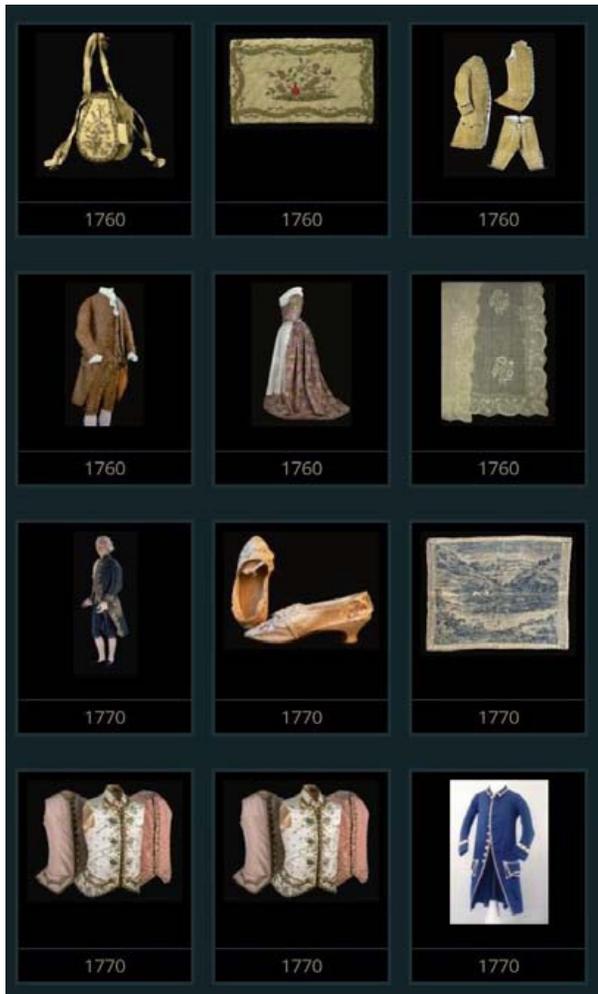
of people's lifetimes. Also covered are accessories, handkerchiefs, pickets and purses, buttons and buckles, neckwear, spectacles, headwear, walking sticks, and whitework and metallics.

Many of the learning guides include links to photos of costumes from the exhibit that illustrate what is being discussed.

The second part of the exhibit allows you to explore items in the exhibit through detailed images and descriptions. The exhibit includes a comprehensive finding aid (above) for selecting the gender and age, type type of clothing, the range of dates, and the geography, and using keywords.

Selecting the image of an item from the finding aid displays the item in the viewer (right), along with a detailed description. There are also navigation buttons for moving to the next or previous item in the search results, and a zoom feature for examining the item in more detail.

Here is a small sample of the 225 items on exhibit, these from the 1760s and 1770s:



Viewer displays selected result with detailed description.

### Costume Design Center

Colonial Williamsburg Foundation's Costume Design Center sew the clothing for the 500 to 800 people who are staff members and re-enactors at the Colonial Williamsburg site. Many of those employees have more than one position, for example, a craftsman who also dances at Palace balls and acts in a theater production requires two or even three types of costumes.

The Design Center is celebrating its 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary this year, and the resource page presents a comprehensive timeline that describes the history of the Center. Also offered "Dressing for the Occasion," which discusses the history of the Center, and provides a detailed explanation of the painstaking process of researching and

constructed the costumes from historical sources. Finally, the Center offers a resource list of sources they have found useful.

Colonial Williamsburg's *18<sup>th</sup> Century Clothing* website is an amazing resource, whether you just getting started in historical costuming are an experienced costumer looking for resources on costuming for the period, or are just interested in learning more about the clothing of the period.

*Philip Gust* enjoys sci-fi and fantasy costuming, and has particular interests in props, special effects, and prosthetic makeup. He also costumes in historical periods, including Regency, Victorian, and early 20<sup>th</sup> C.